

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Warde, Alan.** *The Practice of Eating*. Malden (MA): Polity Press, 2016. 203 pp., \$24.95 paper (9780745691718)

In recent decades, Alan Warde has become an influential figure in both food studies and the sociology of consumption; his work in each of these distinct yet overlapping fields consistently helps to reciprocally inform and refine one another. In *The Practice of Eating*, Warde avails himself of the sociology of consumption's recent "practice turn" to develop a rigorous account of eating as a multifaceted and variable social activity. In his view, practice theory provides the means to create a sociological account of eating that knits together many of the best qualities of previous socio-cultural studies of food and dining, while also addressing their characteristic limits and oversights. In turn, he believes, an extended examination of eating can expand the reach of practice theory itself, enhancing especially its ability to comprehend "highly complex but weakly regulated activities" (7). Although Warde's book does not contain original empirical research and is rather scant on concrete examples, it consolidates a large and diverse body of scholarship into a coherent theoretical framework for analyzing eating as a social practice.

Until recently, Warde argues, properly sociological analyses of eating have been surprisingly scarce within the burgeoning body of popular and academic writing on food. To the extent that eating has often been conceptualized as a purely physiological process under the purview of nutritional science, the specifically social dynamics of food consumption have remained underappreciated. Social-scientific studies of eating within psychology, marketing and economics have frequently been quite truncated, orienting themselves around various practical public health concerns and the objective of "getting individuals to behave in their own best interests in accordance with scientifically determined dietary guidelines" (12).

While sociology holds promise as a means of deepening such work, Warde suggests that it too has fallen short of developing a nuanced understanding of eating. In his view, much extant work in the sociology of food has been anchored in a political economy framework that highlights the systemic dimensions of food production but "pay[s] scant attention to the site of consumption or relations of consumption" (13). While not wanting to discount the contributions of political econ-

omy, Warde holds that developing a distinct sociological analysis of eating will necessarily entail “bracketing off” (23) questions of production and provisioning, foregoing holistic analyses of contemporary food systems.

In his efforts to isolate the “social processes surrounding final consumption” (23) as the focal point of his analysis of eating, Warde draws inspiration from anthropology, trans-disciplinary food studies, cognitive and social psychology, and the sociology of consumption. He credits the latter field in particular for resisting its parent discipline’s abiding productivism and providing “a backdrop and impetus to emergent sociological approaches to food consumption” (2). The “cultural turn” in this field over the past few decades has established everyday consumption practices as a site of serious academic study. However, Warde argues that its lop-sided focus on the “conspicuous” aspects of consumer behaviour has congealed into a voluntaristic model of action premised on “an active, expressive, choosing consumer, motivated by concerns for personal identity and a fashioned lifestyle” (4).

For Warde, theories of practice have taken root within the sociology of consumption precisely because they act as a corrective to excessive individualism and culturalism, highlighting the “inconspicuous,” embodied, collectively-derived, socially and materially embedded dimensions of consumption. While diverse, theories of practice converge in the belief that practices – rather than individuals or reified social structures – are the fundamental unit of sociological analysis. As Warde asserts, they understand human action “as a recursive process whereby the repetition of performances, in a similar fashion, by a great many different actors, establishes a way of doing things which is constraining upon others who seek to participate in that activity” (150). As an established “way of doing things” subtended by an intricate nexus of elements, a social practice is in one sense an “entity” that orchestrates individual behaviour, but its very existence relies upon the “performances” through which “individuals carry that practice forward, expressing, affirming, reproducing and transforming it” (40).

This recursive model, Warde holds, provides a cogent framework for analyzing the interplay of regularity and innovation in the performance of contemporary eating practices. As a social practice, eating is not simply a physiological act but a dynamic process arising from “the interrelationships between the food which is consumed, bodily incorporation and social occasion” (58). A general sociological theory of eating, Warde asserts, requires close attention to the orchestration of these three “elementary forms” of food consumption and to other unique features that distinguish eating as a practice. Unlike a variety of

relatively self-contained “integrated” practices, eating sits uneasily at the juncture of a number of distinct formal practices (nutrition science, etiquette, cookery, marketing, and so on). To the extent that eating is a “compound practice” permeated with the competing standards and imperatives of a variety of component practices, Warde argues, it “tends to be weakly coordinated and weakly regulated, leaving much discretion to individuals” (10).

While eating today in Europe and other affluent regions is not subject to a high degree of “social coordination and authoritative regulation” (152), this does not mean that individuals are now simply free to do as they please, or that all social cues around eating have dissolved into a generalized state of “gastro-anomie” (80). Indeed, this very absence of overt control forces us to consider the subtle ways in which eating continues to be socially orchestrated. While now largely immune to “authoritative steering” (153), Warde emphasizes, eating is increasingly subject to the blandishments of cultural and bureaucratic intermediaries seeking to formalize and disseminate new norms governing how and what to eat. Quite apart from the persuasive effect of intermediaries, he stresses, people continue to arrive at “an orderly and practical mode of going about eating” (99) through the unreflective patterning of conduct supplied by habituation, routine, custom, convention, and so on. Such self-actuating dispositions, are not simply a matter of internalized procedure, but exist in relation to encircling material and institutional conditions, representing “practical responses to the affordances and constraints of a shared social environment” (6).

Warde’s book represents an ambitious and intellectually formidable effort to deploy the resources of practice theory to develop a consolidated sociological account of eating as a complex and variable social practice. Cutting through the eclecticism and fragmentation of much work in its field, it surveys and synthesizes an impressively wide body of interdisciplinary material on food and dining, establishing a comprehensive yet flexible theoretical framework that holds much promise for the study of obesity, specialized diets, eating disorders, popular food media, and many other contemporary eating-related topics. In spite of this promise, *The Practice of Eating* suffers from its sporadic and selective use of empirical evidence, which is often (as Warde acknowledges) adduced as “little more than a demonstration of the relevance of categories and concepts to the description of unsystematically selected episodes” (5). As a result, it can read less like a source of provocative new insights about specific eating practices than a bloodless, arcane and sometimes pedantic effort to illustrate the descriptive powers of practice theory.

Nevertheless, this dense, challenging and suggestive book is bound to be an important point of reference, inspiration and contestation for future work in food studies for many years to come.

*Brock University*

Dennis Soron

**Dennis Soron** is an Associate Professor in the Sociology Department at Brock University, where he is also affiliated with the Social Justice and Equity Studies graduate program and the Social Justice Research Institute.

**E-Mail:** [dsoron@brocku.ca](mailto:dsoron@brocku.ca)